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ABSTRACT

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Families, Education, and the Technological Age

Scott W. Somerville ■

Abstract

This transcription of a presentation by Scott Somerville, an attorney for the Home School Legal Defense Association, discusses the use of technology by families who home school. Issues addressed include the extent of home schooling in the United States, the use of computers by home schoolers; how the home-schooling parent learns to teach; how the parent helps children learn, including a discussion of unit studies; whether fathers as well as mothers home school their children; and whether home schoolers can legally meet and share resources.

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Introduction

Because I'm an attorney, I always get the opportunity to tell a few attorney jokes. How many of you know the one about the rats? If you know the rat joke, just raise your hand. OK, that's too many—I won't tell the rat joke. You know where copper wire came from, don't you? Two lawyers fighting over the same penny.

My job as an attorney is a little different from normal. I defend families who've chosen to educate their children at home. I cover families in Illinois—so this is territory I know well—and Indiana, Michigan, Oklahoma, Kansas, Utah (I'm still trying to pick up Colorado so I can have a monopoly), Virginia, DC, Maryland, Florida, Northern Mariana Islands, and the Virgin Islands. If anybody here is thinking about home schooling, let me make one request. Please move to the Virgin Islands, start home schooling, and get into legal trouble. In the Virgin Islands, home schooling is completely illegal, but people do it down there all the time. They just say, "Hey, mon, no problem." They have a very laid-back attitude, which is good for the home-schooling families, and it doesn't get the hard-working home school legal defense litigation team to tropical paradise.

I was talking to some folks earlier today and thinking about the Thanksgiving dinner that's coming up real soon at my home. I have six children, and I was one of six boys myself. (My family life's real interesting, and if I start telling West Virginia stories, we'll be here all night.) My six brothers and I get together every year at Thanksgiving, and we have very interesting things to share when it comes to the subject of education. I'm a home school legal defense attorney, I've had two brothers who are private school principals, and I've got two other brothers who have their children in public school, so we really cover most bases. My youngest brother is 22 and unmarried. (I'm not looking for a sister-in-law actively, but if you know any real good ones, we could talk afterwards.)

When we get together at Thanksgiving, there's some real tensions within the family, and I'm going to apologize to my brothers. I've discovered that over the course of the last 10 years of being a feisty home schooler, I've said some things that have hurt my brothers' feelings. Two of my brothers have chosen public schools as being best for their children. Some of the comments that I've made over the course of the last 10 years have been rude, insensitive, offensive, arrogant, obnoxious, and sometimes just plain wrong. This realization came to me recently when one of my brothers explained to me, "Look, it's not easy for me to decide what's best to do with my 6-year-old son. I looked real hard at home schooling and thought real hard about private schools, and I finally decided to pick what I think is a real good program here in our county. And I just feel like you're going to reject me because of things you've said about

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public schools." I realized that my own tendency to be pompous, arrogant, and other things that lawyers are so good at sometimes made me forget that this is a human being here, that the school choice that we make is a personal one, and it's not something that I should just casually joke about. So I made a commitment to myself saying, "OK, I've got some real differences of opinion with folks who believe that public education is best for all children—and I am certainly going to be open about that—but I don't have to be nasty about it." I would like to apologize on behalf of the entire home-schooling community for any arrogance you may have ever heard. A lot of home schoolers, you have to understand, believe that they're making a difficult and dangerous choice for their family.

Home Schooling, the Law, and Public Schools

When home schooling started, when my organization, the Home School Legal Defense Association, started back in 1983, it was just plain illegal to home school in most states. Illinois was not one of them. Home schooling has been legal here since 1950. But elsewhere it was just plain illegal. You would be charged with truancy, and you might be put in jail. Michigan was busy prosecuting home schoolers up until 1993, I think, when we finally won a supreme court case up there. Iowa was prosecuting people cheerfully up until 1991. My boss Mike Farris was in front of the North Dakota supreme court seven times until they passed a law in 1991 legalizing home schooling. So there are a number of home schoolers who really do believe the public school officials are out to get them. And that's based on recent history.

There are also a lot of home schoolers who have had a bad attitude towards public schools. In addition to feeling like the government is out to get them, they also feel quite honestly that the educational establishment has too much power to crush the competition. If the Ford Motor Company could design rules for Honda imports, we wouldn't necessarily expect Ford to design rules that would be good for Honda. A lot of times, the home schoolers feel that state departments of education, local school boards, or truant officers are much more interested in protecting the public school than in being fair. So that's where a lot of the home schoolers are coming from. If you've ever heard a bad attitude from a home schooler, I apologize.

Home Schoolers and Technology

I would like to share some things tonight from the home schooler's perspective that have to do with our theme, which is technology. There are things that home schoolers are free to do in seizing the new technologies that are available that public schools really aren't free to do. How easy is it to get one school district to implement a new technology? It isn't easy. To get one home school family to take advantage of a new technology is real easy. You look at it, and you say, "Well, maybe that'll work." You pull out the checkbook and say, "Well, I guess we got that much," and bam! you've got the new technology. Home schoolers are free to react, respond, and take advantage of new technologies and are doing so. What I hope to be able to do tonight is to share some of the things that the home schoolers are learning—some of our successes, some of our failures—so that folks who are running much larger school systems can learn from some of our successes and from some of our mistakes—because we make plenty of both.

The reason I think that home schoolers have a lot to say to the education community at large is because we've got a lot more freedom than institutional schools do—freedom to succeed and freedom to fail. We're accountable to ourselves and therefore have a kind of freedom that's kind of scary sometimes. In this world of technological change, this kind of freedom is very informative. I'm going to make one suggestion—keep your eyes on the home schoolers. Whatever you're doing—whether you're running the library, whether you're an advocacy group, whether you're running a local school district or part of the Department of Education, or whether you're a university or wherever you come from here tonight—I really encourage you to just kind of keep one eyeball peeled and watch what the home schoolers are doing as far as technology goes.

I keep talking to journalists who are studying education and the Internet, and each time I get a chance to talk to them, I say, "Have you looked over the educational resources on the Internet?" They say, "Yeah, that's why I'm writing the article." I say, "Have you seen anything about home schoolers?" And they say, "It looks like most of the people on the Internet are home schoolers." You type "home school" on a Web search, you get 200,000 hits, and that was a year ago. I think it's up significantly since then. Home schoolers are

aggressively seizing the Internet, multimedia, and other new technologies because, let's face it, one thing that your average home school mom has is job security. My wife and I have six kids, and the youngest is 6. Nobody is going to put us out of a job here for quite a while. We're not worried about automation. What we're looking for is a labor-saving device that enables one mother to do a good job of teaching multiple children, and because of that need, these new technologies are fascinating and exciting. That was a little lead-in to who I am, where I'm coming from, and what I hope that home schoolers would have to share with this audience.

Audience Questions

I'd much rather hear what questions you have, and make a good faith effort to answer them, than to either put you all to sleep or risk incurring your wrath, because frankly there's just too much ripe fruit in this room for a home schooler to stand up and irritate a bunch of folks who mostly serve the public school community. Does anybody have any questions that a home schooler's perspective on these technologies might be able to help?

What is the extent of home schooling across the country, and of those people who are home schooling, how many of them do aggressively use technology?

All right, quick home school demographics: Home schooling has been growing at a rate of about 15 to 20% per year for the last 15 years. Most recent estimates are that 1.2 million students are being educated at home. If home schooling were a state, we'd be larger than New Jersey and just after Georgia. If we were a single educational system, we'd be the 10th largest state. The home-schooling community is a little better educated than the average American and slightly more affluent, but not much. About 50% of home schoolers make between $25,000 and $75,000 a year. A bare majority of home-schooling parents—one or the other—has a bachelor's degree. In the 1980s, home schoolers were predominantly evangelical Christians, but that's rapidly changing. The home school population is becoming more and more diverse every day. There's rapid new growth amongst Roman Catholic home schoolers and traditional yuppies (if I may use a slightly derogatory term). Lots of folks are coming into the home-schooling community other than your Bible-Belt Baptists.

In a recent survey, I think about 34% of U.S. households had a computer in the home, and of those, about 26% of U.S. households had children using a computer in the home. That's what I remember. (If anybody's got more current figures, correct me.) Within the home-schooling community, I believe 86% of home schoolers have a computer in the home, and 85% of home schoolers have children using the computer in the home. Computer use amongst home-schooling families is easily triple that of the American population at large.

Most home schoolers are trying to find good educational software. I'll be openly critical—there isn't much good educational software. Most of the home schoolers who have older children are using the Internet trying to find distance learning and other resources that are available. I've got six kids, and we've got six computers at our home. We haven't got a network set up—that's the next real project. But it's very common in home-schooling circles to have not one but two or even three computers because mom uses that computer and the kids are on that computer. And if you're like Mike Farris and have 10 kids, you've really got to keep buying more technology. The home-schooling movement as a whole, although not computer sophisticated, is using technology aggressively. As a political movement, we're also very heavily involved in using the Internet to try to communicate. We've got a bunch of politically active people who are using the Internet for organizational purposes as well as for educational purposes.

How about the home school teacher. How does the home-schooling mom typically learn how to teach?

I'm going to answer that question two different ways—learn to teach at all, first of all, and then learn to teach technology. The best way to learn to home school is to start with a 4-year-old. This is the ideal way because you know more than they do. Then you just try to stay ahead of them.

When it comes to technology, basically you've got the same answer. My wife started out very computer averse. She got her first computer because she needed to be able to print out her lesson plans on a regular basis. "I just need a word processor," she said, "so I can type out what I'm going to do and just change this and change that and print it out so I don't have to sit down and rewrite everything every time." Well, that was about 10 years ago now, and since that time, she's gone

from just using the computer to type in a lesson plan to the point now where she's got a Pentium 166, she's online with about 40 new e-mail messages every day, she's got five or six different software packages that she can just cook on, and she's got her database running. All of this has come about because she started with one practical need and grew from there. If I can generalize from that experience, I would pass this tip on: one of the best ways to get real people to learn sophisticated skills is to start them on very simple skills.

I wrote an article for a home-schooling magazine 5 years ago, back when almost no home schoolers were on the Internet. I was talking about the Internet, talking about modems and telecommunications, and I made this one very simple suggestion. I said, "Call your local library and see if their card catalogue is online." Then I went through step-by-step directions on how to get a cheap modem so that you could dial into your library, because to the home-schooling mother, this is an absolutely vital need. If you've ever tried going to a library with three or four small children waddling around your feet while you're looking for resources, you know that it's tough. If you've ever been a librarian and seen some poor haggard parent coming in trying to pick good books for the children while they are bouncing off the shelves, you know that it's difficult to pick good resources and also to be a good babysitter and caretaker at the same time. I wrote this little article and just said, "Here's how you do it." I had tons of people saying, "Thank you so much for that simple suggestion." They got the modem, they logged on, they used the library, but then once they broke that telecommunications barrier, the world was their oyster. A lot of those people who got started 5 years ago just looking at a card catalogue are the e-mail queens right now. They pass on all the funny jokes and all the other things that you folks know about—e-mail culture. If we start with something real simple that works, that meets an immediate need, and then we trust people to grow in their skill and sophistication, I think we'll find that a lot of education takes place.

How does the home school mom who comes from whatever walk of life learn what to do to create in children the desire to be intellectually curious, to problem solve, and to go on and learn. One tool for that is technology and the Internet. That's fantastic. But in the meantime, how does that home school mom know that isolated skills learning is not necessarily the best and how does the home school mom access the knowledge about education that she should be using?

There's something that is very, very popular amongst the home-schooling community at large, and it's called unit studies. That's something that a lot of educators already know about. Something that is continuously reinforced among the home-schooling community is instead of just getting a textbook and plunking it down and saying, "OK, we're going to do so and so today," to try to design an entire family-based curriculum around one item of interest and then pursue that through all the different disciplines and see where it comes out.

The best example that I've had is in my own family. My wife, who was a history major, loves that subject, but she's trying to teach six children about events leading up to the Civil War. She's trying to go from something that she had been studying to the whole state of the United States leading up to the Civil War. She did a unit study on cotton. She simply took cotton and began learning about it—learning about Egyptian cotton, talking about the pyramids, digging in some books about Egypt and its culture. Then she got into the state of our Union back in 1810, 1815, or so and how all of the southern states—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana—were basically unsettled. She got into Eli Whitney and the cotton gin, how that revolutionary discovery in 1796 changed cotton farming from a luxury crop that only a handful of people could afford to a very cheap fabric that everybody wanted. Then she looked at the cotton gin and all of southern America and this plant, and she brought in the story of African American peoples, talking about the slave ships that brought them over—talking about traffic in human lives. My own family was run out of Alabama in 1960. They burned a cross on my father's lawn, fired him from the church that he was in. So we tied in my own history, my own family history about being part of the Civil Rights Movement. We put all of that together in this one unit study on cotton. Boy, did my kids learn a lot about cotton. And about America. And about what it means to be an American.

Unit studies are a very popular subject amongst the home schoolers who are trying to break out of traditional ways of thinking and textbook-dominated education into a kind of education that really brings the whole family and all of life together into a learning experience. The Blondins are going to be

sharing their experiences with us a little later and can expand on this idea.

Here's another generalization I think I can share with everybody: Education is life. Education is life, and one thing that's easy for home schoolers to do is just to take everything that happens and tie it all back in together into our life. It's a little harder for a professional educator who comes in and has a schedule and a set time to be able to communicate that everything that we're learning, and everything that we're doing, is all tied together in a seamless web. We know that's true, but sometimes the institutional setting makes it a little harder to communicate that idea in a way that the children really can grasp. Now, that's a little bit more sermon than direct practical answer, but I hope I gave you part of it.

Are there home school dads?

The answer to that question is definitely yes. Home schoolers are already a minority—2% of school-aged children are educated at home. Pretty much all children who are below compulsory attendance age are educated at home, but that's a distinction that I don't need to push. Home schoolers make up about 2% of the U.S. population, and of those, probably 98% of the primary full-time educators are the mothers. There are at least 2% of home-schooling families where the dad is the one who's doing the teaching and the mom is the bread-winner, and then there's a substantial number of single-parent households where the father is doing the teaching. To be real honest, a lot of single fathers say, "I just can't do that. I cannot do a good job of earning a living and do a good job of teaching my children." Whereas a lot of single mothers say, "I have got to provide an education for my child, and I am not going to go on welfare." So it's fairly rare that you see the single father doing the teaching, although it does happen.

I think the real unsung heroes in our culture today are the single mothers who seem to me to be trying to do everything because they have to. I am amazed at the number of single mothers who have taken up the challenge of earning a living, teaching their children, maintaining a home, and trying to stay sane at the same time. There are a lot of families like my own where my wife does about 70% of the teaching and I do about 30%. But I would still have to give her the credit for doing the lion's share of the teaching. So I hope I'm honoring my wife. Home schooling is a women's movement. And the fact that the mainstream press has not picked up on that fact, in my opinion, just shows that they're a little blind to one of the most profound women's movements of the late 20th century. Home schooling is a great women's movement because with 1.2 million children being educated at home, and quite successfully, these women who are doing the lion's share of the work are leaving a mark on American society.

Do home schoolers ever get together and do co-oping or sharing resources and so forth or does that break laws?

Well, you're asking the right man, and in some cases, it does break the law. In Maryland alone, which is where I live, there are about 200 groups like that called umbrella schools. A brand new one just started up that is predominantly African American. The child care administration came and told that school they had to shut down. They were meeting together on Thursday mornings from 9 until 2, and the child care administration said, "You can't do that. You're breaking the law." One part about being lawyers is setting people straight, so we solved that problem real quick.

Let me talk about the home school community as such because it's very much one of my favorite subjects. Home schoolers get together like crazy. Everywhere you go, there's a local home school support group. There's probably three local home school support groups that are serving home schoolers right here. They tend to have monthly meetings. They tend to have newsletters that come out every month or two. They usually have a curriculum fair as an annual event. They often have drama classes and field days, and many of them will have graduation ceremonies at the end of the year for those kids who are graduating. It's a combination of an opportunity for social events and help with some of the more challenging subjects.

In my own community, we're part of something called the Family Schools Program. There are 250 kids that are part of our private home school program. Every Wednesday afternoon, all the students file out of the front doors of this private day school, and 250 home schoolers file in the back door of this same school at the same time. My oldest son is teaching the little kids' phys ed class, and my second son is in the drama club. All six of my kids are participating in different things that are

all being done simultaneously. That's what the umbrella groups and local support groups do.

There are also things that we call co-op schools, which are two or three parents who are team teaching. That's an area where single mothers in particular find that they can get two or three single mothers together to pool resources—one will teach all day Saturday, one will take the morning shift, and one will come in and try to fill in the cracks. In Illinois you can do that, in Indiana you can do that, in Michigan you can't do that. In Colorado you can't do that unless you file under a special form. So the laws do get kind of quirky fast, and people call us up all the time saying, "Can I have my sister teach my child in her home?" And the first question asked is, "What state are you calling from?" You have to remember that education is the most local of all local issues, and the education laws (I speak as an education lawyer) are always defined by the state and often by your own local school district.

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